

**An Address by  
Maureen O'Neil, President  
International Development Research Centre  
to the  
World Economic Forum Board of Governors**

Colleagues, distinguished guests and visitors, governors of the World Economic Forum. It is a pleasure for me to be with you today. I am the president of the International Development Research Centre, or IDRC as we are more commonly known, a not-for-profit Crown corporation established by the Government of Canada in 1970.

Thirty-two years ago, the IDRC act specified that our organization should incorporate information sciences and related technologies in our main mission to assist in supporting the development research capacity in the developing world. We have been involved in the digital divide business, as it is now called, for a long time.

When the Information Society and Development conference was held in South Africa in 1996, our organization made ICTs for Development our largest program and launched Acacia: Communities in the Information Society in Sub-Saharan Africa the very same year.

In Asia, we assisted with the establishment of the first ISPs in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Mongolia, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. When our prime minister announced a new \$20 million Institute for Connectivity in the Americas at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City last April, he directed that IDRC should incubate and grow this important new initiative.

IDRC's longstanding experience in the digital divide business compels me to share two points with you.

First, the introduction of ICTs into the development process isn't a "light switch" that gets turned on and lights begin to shine. Countries and societies don't become "e-ready", or more importantly e-capable, overnight. In the industrial world, the Internet took almost 30 years to gestate from its beginnings as ARPANET in 1967 to the first publicly commercial Internet services beginning in the mid-1990's. The developing world needs time and room to work out how this makes sense on their own terms, not on the terms that we might think they should follow.

This incubation process need not take 30 years, but, I repeat, it is not a light switch. We cannot afford to be fickle with this, as has occurred with other development priorities that lost their lustre as the headlines faded.

Second, the business of *development* is very, very different than the development of *business*. Social and economic development is different from business development. A strategic plan for a country is very different from a business plan for a new start-up.

Social and economic development requires a multitude of stakeholders. Civil society, business, education and the State all need to make progress, not just the sales for the most recent quarter.

At IDRC, we were happy to accept the World Economic Forum's invitation to co-chair this Digital Divide Supervisory Committee. We feel that if as many of the actors in the development business can think, plan and eventually act together, then we will all save time, money and resources.

In the civil society where IDRC works, our programming in ICTs for development represents a social investment that has the latent function of building market awareness, technology savvy and even entrepreneurship. We have seen this happen over and over again in the many telecentre, SchoolNet and related projects that we have supported all over the world.

When you think about the developing world. When you think about the business of development. When you think about the development of business, I want to leave you, my colleagues from industry and the business sector, with one last thought, an anecdote that apparently comes from the Canadian shoe manufacturer, Thomas Bata.

Bata sent a shoe salesman to a developing world village. The salesman returned to say: "No one in the village wears shoes, Mr. Bata. There is no market for shoes in the village." This salesman was fired.

A second shoe salesman returned from the same village a year later. He beamed to Mr. Bata: "No one is wearing shoes in the village, Mr. Bata. The market for shoes there is incredible!"

The developing world represents a market alright, but a market for products, services and contributions to the world economy that we have yet to fathom or imagine. At IDRC, we look forward to navigating this pathway to development with you and offer our sincere appreciation for having been involved in this important process.